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Terrorism Studies and the Politics of State Power¹

Richard Jackson

Paper prepared for International Studies Association (ISA) 47th Annual Convention, 28 Feb. – 3 March, 2007, Chicago, United States.

Abstract:

An analysis of the terrorism studies field reveals a number of methodological, theoretical and ethical-normative problems. One of its more serious problems is its tendency to uncritically reproduce a number of highly questionable narratives and assumptions about terrorism as a phenomenon and counterterrorism as state response. For example, a great deal of past and recently published terrorism research unreflectively assumes that: non-state terrorism poses an existential threat to modern societies; there is a ‘new terrorism’ that is religiously motivated, willing to employ weapons of mass destruction, and aimed primarily at causing mass casualties; the roots of terrorism lie in individual psychological abnormality and religious extremism; and coercive-based counterterrorism is an effective response to non-state terrorism. This paper argues that these misconceptions are not simply errors based on poor research. Rather, these broadly accepted understandings – this terrorism ‘knowledge’ – also work politically to reify and reproduce state power. In particular, this ‘scientifically’ generated terrorism ‘knowledge’ frequently functions to, among others: de-legitimise resistance by non-state actors; justify domestic political projects unconnected to terrorism, such as social surveillance; bolster the power and priorities of the agencies of state security; benefit powerful economic actors linked to the security sector, such as private security firms, defence industries, and pharmaceutical companies; control wider social and political dissent and set the parameters for acceptable political debate; and provide intellectual justification for foreign imperial projects. However, academic research is never without political and normative consequence; knowledge is always for somebody and for something. This paper argues that given the current situation in the field, there is an urgent need for an explicitly ‘critical’ terrorism studies.

¹ This paper is a work in progress for a symposium on ‘Making the Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies’ for the journal *European Political Science*. All comments and suggestions are welcome. It is supported by an overseas conference grant from the British Academy, for which the author is extremely grateful.

INTRODUCTION

In the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, terrorism studies has undergone a major transformation from minor subfield of security studies to a large stand alone field with its own dedicated journals, research centres, leading scholars and experts, research funding opportunities, conferences and university study programmes. In fact, it is probably one of the fastest expanding areas of research in the Western academic world, with literally thousands of new books and articles published over the past few years,² and increasing numbers of postgraduate dissertations.³ While such a rapid expansion offers the possibility of exciting new research and the potential for genuine advancement in existing knowledge, past and recent review exercises on the state of the field would inject a note of caution into such optimism. These reviews suggest that terrorism studies as a whole is beset by a number of epistemological, theoretical, methodological and ethical-normative problems which limit its potential for producing rigorous empirical findings and genuine theoretical advancement.

In this paper, I briefly touch on some of the key criticisms that have been levelled at the field of terrorism studies. In particular, I focus on what is arguably one of the most serious problems facing the field, namely, its state-centricity and the way it functions politically to reify state power. Its close identification with state priorities and perspectives, its uncritical reproduction of accepted narratives and terrorism 'knowledge', its conformity and totalising certainty and its inbuilt commitment to providing counter-terrorist policy relevant research, poses major analytical and normative problems for the field. Analytically, it narrows the potential range of research subjects, encourages conformity in outlook and method, and obstructs vigorous, wide-ranging debate, particularly regarding the causes of non-state terrorism. Normatively, it identifies an entire field and scholarly community with the reproduction of state power and the promotion of particular kinds of political projects and forms of state action of dubious efficacy or moral legitimacy. In short, it functions to construct the field of terrorism studies as an arm of state security.

For these reasons, I argue that there is an urgent need for an explicitly 'critical terrorism studies'. A 'critical terrorism studies' (CTS) would be distinctive due to its willingness to challenge accepted knowledge and commonsense about terrorism and its acute awareness of the power-knowledge relationship in terrorism-related research. As a consequence, CTS scholarship would be characterised by a critical reflexivity regarding the academic production and uses of terrorism-related research, the adoption of a broader research focus that includes the use of terrorism by state actors, an acknowledgement of

² Research using publishing databases has found that even before 2001, terrorism publications had grown over 234 percent on average between 1988-2001 in fields like terrorism studies, communication studies, comparative politics, peace studies, economics and psychology. Avishag Gordon, 2004. 'Terrorism and Knowledge Growth: A Databases and Internet Analysis', in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, London: Frank Cass, 109.

³ Research by Avishag Gordon found that in the ten years from 1990-1999 at least 160 research dissertations on terrorism-related subjects had been carried out. It can reasonably be assumed that this number has further increased since 2001. Avishag Gordon, 1999. 'Terrorism Dissertations and the Evolution of a Speciality: An Analysis of Meta-Information', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11(2): 141-50.

the interdependencies between state policy and non-state terrorism and an openly normative, emancipatory praxis in regards to counter-terrorism.

TERRORISM STUDIES: THE STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE

Both past and more recent review exercises of the terrorism studies field have revealed an embarrassing list of methodological and analytical problems, including: its poor research methods and procedures, particularly its over-reliance on secondary information and general failure to undertake primary research;⁴ its failure to develop an accepted definition of terrorism and subsequent failure to develop rigorous theories and concepts;⁵ the descriptive, narrative and condemnatory character of much of its output; its dominance by orthodox international relations approaches and general lack of inter-disciplinarity; its ahistoricity and tendency to treat contemporary terrorism as a ‘new’ phenomenon that started on September 11, 2001;⁶ its restricted research focus on a few topical subjects and its subsequent failure to fully engage with a range of other important topics,⁷ not least the issue of state terrorism;⁸ and its strong prescriptive focus⁹ – among others.¹⁰

⁴ Although there are clearly obstacles to primary research in terms of ‘talking to terrorists’, a growing number of studies by scholars such as Jeffrey Sluka, Mia Bloom, John Horgan, Jessica Stern and others demonstrate that these obstacles are not nearly as insurmountable as some might assume. I would argue along with the anthropologist Joseba Zulaika that the failure to engage directly with the subject of terrorism studies is reflective of their taboo nature and the fear of contamination. There is a pervasive attitude within some sectors of the field that understanding terrorist motives equates to sympathising with them and explaining their behaviour equates to justifying or exonerating it, which is why most terrorism ‘experts’ have never met a ‘terrorist’. There are few fields of study where the subject is deliberately kept at such great ontological and moral distance from the researcher than terrorism studies. A typical expression of this taboo comes from David Jones and M.L.R. Smith who suggest that all efforts by critically-oriented scholars to understand the root causes of contemporary terrorism or empathise with the injustices which may be driving it confers ‘a legitimacy which demands empathy’ and is akin to the toleration of Nazism. David Jones and M.L.R. Smith, 2007. ‘Pedagogy or Pedantry: A Rejoinder to Our Critics’, *International Affairs*, 83(1): 185. See also, David Jones and M.L.R. Smith, 2006. ‘The Commentariat and Discourse Failure: Language and Atrocity in Cool Britannia’, *International Affairs*, 82(6): 1077-1100. For a critique of this tendency in the field, see Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, 1996. *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism*, London: Routledge, 149-50, 179; Cynthia Mahmood, 1995. *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; and Judith Butler, 2002. ‘Explanation and Exoneration’, *Theory & Event*, 5(4).

⁵ Most terrorism scholars have simply abandoned the search for definition and use the term in their research without defining it. This is a real problem for the field, as continual debate over key concepts and ideas is critical for theoretical innovation and intellectual progress.

⁶ Andrew Silke’s analysis of 490 articles published in the core terrorism journals from 1990-1999 found that only 13 focused on non-contemporary terrorism, and of those, only seven looked at terrorism before 1960. Andrew Silke, 2004. ‘The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research’, in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, 209. See also Marie Breen Smyth, ‘Wither the Study of Political Terror? Challenges, Problems and Issues for a Critical Research Agenda’, International Studies Association (ISA) 47th Annual Convention, 28 Feb. – 3 March, 2007, Chicago, United States.

⁷ The field tends to focus excessively on a few topical cases, most of which reflect current political concerns. For example, in recent years, hundreds of studies have been undertaken on Al Qaeda and related forms of ‘Islamic terrorism’, Northern Ireland, the Middle East conflict and issues related to counter-terrorism in the US and UK, such as the role of the media, suicide terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) terrorism, cyber-terrorism and terrorist financing. In part, the problem is related to the disciplinary and geographical character of the main scholars in the field, who are generally from international relations

However, a much more serious problem for the field is that it has, for the most part, adopted state-centric priorities and perspectives on terrorism. Within the literature, terrorism is seen as an illegitimate form of political violence practiced mainly by non-state actors; moreover, it is viewed as a kind of asymmetric warfare waged against (mainly democratic) states and societies. It is also viewed as posing a serious, even existential threat to the survival of liberal democratic states, and thus, extraordinary state counter-terrorism efforts are considered to be de facto necessary and legitimate. Importantly, it is assumed that one of the key purposes of terrorism studies is to provide policy-relevant research to aid the authorities in their counter-terrorism campaign.

Partly as a consequence of its inherent state-centricity, there is a tendency by many terrorism scholars to uncritically reproduce a number of accepted assumptions, narratives and discursive formations, thereby constructing and maintaining a particular kind of terrorism 'knowledge'. A series of studies on the academic and political discourses of terrorism¹¹ reveals that the field as a whole tends to continuously reproduce

and security studies and based in the U.S. or the UK. The cause and consequence of this restricted focus is a general failure to fully examine a range of other important issues, including, among many others: state terrorism; terrorism and the global South; gender and terrorism; the history of terrorism; and the political causes of terrorism. Few of these subjects have thus far received sustained attention from scholars in the field or have been studied primarily from within other disciplines.

⁸ Andrew Silke's review of 490 articles in the core terrorism studies journals reveals that only 12 or less than two percent of them examined state terrorism. Silke, 'The Road Less Travelled', 206.

⁹ Andrew Silke concludes that much terrorism research is driven by policy concerns and is limited to government agendas. Andrew Silke, 2004. 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, 58. Moreover, these weaknesses in the field are interconnected. As Gaetano Ilardi explains: 'The prescriptive focus of terrorism studies has also diverted attention from other critical matters, not the least of which is the development of a sound theoretical understanding of the dynamics of terrorism.' Gaetano Ilardi, 2004. 'Redefining the Issues: The Future of Terrorism Research and the Search for Empathy', in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, 215.

¹⁰ These and other criticisms are made in both past and more recent reviews of the field, including: Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman, 1988. *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, Oxford: North Holland; Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, 1989. *The 'Terrorism' Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror*, New York: Pantheon Books; Alexander George, ed., 1991. *Western State Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*; Silke, ed., 2004. *Research on Terrorism*; and Jonny Burnett and Dave Whyte, 'Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* Vol. 1, No. 4 (2005), 1-18. Many of the points raised in this brief overview are given a more detailed treatment in Jeroen Gunning, 2007. 'Babies and Bathwaters: Reflecting on the Pitfalls of Critical Studies on Terrorism', International Studies Association (ISA) 47th Annual Convention, 28 Feb. – 3 March, 2007, Chicago, United States.

¹¹ This research employs a discourse analytic approach which involves careful analysis of hundreds of academic and political texts. The main findings of this broader research agenda have been published amongst others as: Richard Jackson, forthcoming 2007. 'Constructing Enemies: "Islamic Terrorism" in Political and Academic Discourse', *Government & Opposition*; Richard Jackson, forthcoming 2007. 'Playing the Politics of Fear: Writing the Terrorist Threat in the War on Terrorism', in George Kassimeris, ed., *Playing Politics With Terrorism: A User's Guide*, New York: New York University Press; Richard Jackson, forthcoming 2007. 'Critical Reflections on Counter-Sanctuary Discourse', in Michael Innes, ed., *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International; Richard Jackson, forthcoming 2007. 'The Evolution and Implications of EU Counter-Terrorism Discourse after September 11, 2001', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*; Richard Jackson, 2006. 'Genealogy, Ideology, and Counter-Terrorism: Writing Wars on Terrorism from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush Jr', *Studies in Language & Capitalism*, online journal available at: <http://www.languageandcapitalism.info/>; Richard Jackson, 2005. *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*,

a series of core assumptions, narratives and discursive formations about terrorism which have subsequently been accepted as ‘knowledge’. For example, a great deal of past and recently published terrorism research unreflectively takes as its starting point the assumption that terrorism can be understood and studied objectively and scientifically without political bias. As mentioned, terrorism studies also tends to treat terrorism as primarily a form of illegitimate non-state political violence; when state terrorism is discussed, it is usually limited to descriptions of ‘state-sponsored terrorism’ by so-called ‘rogue states’. The deafening silence on the direct use of terrorism by states within the literature is underpinned by a strong belief that liberal democratic states in particular never engage in terrorism as a matter of policy, only in error or misjudgement.

The core sustaining narrative of the field however is that non-state terrorism poses a significant and existential threat to modern societies and that without significant investment in counter-terrorism it could be catastrophic to Western states. This narrative is perhaps unsurprising given the psychological shock engendered by the September 11, 2001 attacks, as well as the *raison d’être* it provides the field. Related to this, a powerful recent discursive construction common to terrorism studies is the notion of a ‘new terrorism’ that is purportedly religiously motivated, willing to employ weapons of mass destruction and aimed primarily at causing mass casualties. In addition, much recent research uses terms like ‘religious terrorism’ and ‘Islamic’ or ‘Islamist terrorism’ in ways that imply an unambiguous and linear causal relationship between forms of Islam and terrorism. Other common narratives and assumptions within the field include: non-state terrorism is rarely if ever successful, which illustrates its inherent irrationality; the roots of terrorism lie in individual psychological abnormality and religious or ideological extremism brought on by ‘radicalisation’ processes; democratic states are more vulnerable to terrorism because of their inherent rights and freedoms; the media provides the oxygen of publicity to terrorism; and coercive-based counter-terrorism is legitimate and effective as a response to campaigns of non-state terrorism.

These and other assumptions and narratives collectively make up a widely accepted ‘knowledge’ or discourse of terrorism. They are reproduced continuously in the core terrorism studies journals, in conferences and in hundreds of publications every year by academics and think-tanks. In addition, they are reproduced culturally and politically through the media, public debate, education and the arts. The important point is that virtually all of these narratives are overly simplistic, misconceived and have a weak basis in empirical research; they are in fact, highly debatable.¹² There is not the space here to provide counter-evidence or arguments to all the assumptions and narratives of the discourse; I have given more detailed first order critique of the dominant terrorism assumptions and narratives elsewhere.¹³ It will suffice to discuss a few points which illustrate how unstable and contested this widely accepted ‘knowledge’ is.

Manchester: Manchester University Press; and Richard Jackson, 2005. ‘Security, Democracy and the Rhetoric of Counter-Terrorism’, *Democracy & Security*, 1(2): 147-71.

¹² The dominant narratives I have described here are virtually identical to a set of dominant ‘myths’ identified in a review of the field from 1979, which is an indication of how persistent and powerful this knowledge is. See Michael Stohl, 1979. ‘Myths and Realities of Political Terrorism’, in Michael Stohl, ed., *The Politics of Terrorism*, New York: Marcel Dekker, 1-19.

¹³ Jackson, ‘Constructing Enemies’; Jackson, ‘Playing the Politics of Fear’; and Jackson, ‘Critical Reflections on Counter-Sanctuary Discourse’.

First, a number of recent studies have seriously questioned the notion of 'new terrorism', demonstrating empirically and through argument that the continuities between 'new' and 'old' terrorism are much greater than any purported differences. In particular, they show how the assertion that the 'new terrorism' is primarily motivated by religion is largely unsupported by the evidence.¹⁴ Second, an increasing number of studies suggest that the threat of terrorism to Western or international security is vastly over-exaggerated.¹⁵ Related to this, a number of scholars have convincingly argued that the likelihood of terrorists deploying weapons of mass destruction is in fact, miniscule,¹⁶ as is the likelihood that so-called rogue states would provide WMD to terrorists.¹⁷ Third, there is no evidence that terrorism is the result of poverty, educational underachievement, unemployment or social alienation,¹⁸ nor is there any evidence of a 'terrorist personality' or any discernable psychopathology among individuals involved in terrorism.¹⁹

Most importantly in the current political and moral climate and contrary to widely accepted knowledge within terrorism studies, every major empirical study has thrown doubt on the notion of a direct causal link between religion and terrorism, and in

¹⁴ See Thomas Copeland, 2001. 'Is the New Terrorism Really New? An Analysis of the New Paradigm for Terrorism', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, XXI(2): 91-105; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 2004. 'How New is the New Terrorism?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27(5): 439-54; and Alexander Spencer, 2006. 'Questioning the Concept of "New Terrorism"', *Peace, Conflict & Development*, 8: 1-33, available online at: <http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk>. Interestingly, Mark Sedgwick argues that al Qaeda is more easily explained in terms of classic theories of terrorism as developed by nineteenth-century Italian anarchists than as a new form of religious terrorism. Mark Sedgwick, 'Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16: 4 (2004), pp. 795-814.

¹⁵ See, among others: Jackson, 'Playing the Politics of Fear'; John Mueller, 2006. *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them*, New York: The Free Press; John Mueller, 2005. 'Six Rather Unusual Propositions about Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17: 487-505; Ehud Sprinzak, 1998. 'The Great Superterrorism Scare', *Foreign Policy*, 112: 110-24; and Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

¹⁶ See Brian Jenkins, 1998. 'Will Terrorists go Nuclear? A Reappraisal', in Harvey Kushner, ed., *The Future of Terrorism: Violence in the New Millennium*, London: Sage; David Long, 1990. *The Anatomy of Terrorism*, New York: The Free Press, 131-2; and Sprinzak, 'The Great Superterrorism Scare'. A number of scholars point out that despite tens of thousands of terrorist attacks over the past four decades, more people have been killed in a single conventional car bomb by the Real IRA in 1998 than in every terrorist attack using WMD before or since combined.

¹⁷ Interestingly, before the September 11, 2001 attacks, many senior officials in the U.S. doubted that rogue states would risk providing WMD to terrorists. See *Countering the Changing Threat of International Terrorism*, Report of the National Commission on Terrorism, June 2000, available online at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/commission.html>, 6; and the Gilmore Commission quoted in Dilip Hiro, 2002. *War Without End: The Rise of Islamic Terrorism and Global Response*, London: Routledge, 391.

¹⁸ Major empirical studies by Robert Pape and Marc Sageman for example, show that the notion that 'Islamic terrorism' results from poverty, disaffection and alienation is empirically unsupported. In fact, both of these studies show that the overwhelming majority of 'terrorists' are middle or upper class, of above average educational standing, professionally employed, often married or in relationships, are well integrated into their communities and generally have good future prospects. See Robert Pape, 2005. *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York: Random House; and Marc Sageman, 2004. *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹⁹ See John Horgan, 2005. *The Psychology of Terrorism*, London: Frank Cass; Andrew Silke, 1998. 'Cheshire-cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research', *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 4: 51-69; Martha Crenshaw, 1992. 'How Terrorists Think: What Psychology can Contribute to Understanding Terrorism', in Laurence Howard, ed., *Terrorism: Roots, Impact, Responses*, London: Praeger; and Raymond Corrado, 1981. 'A Critique of the Mental Disorder Perspective of Political Terrorism', *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 4(3-4): 293-309;

particular the link between Islam and terrorism. The Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism for example, which compiled a database on every case of suicide terrorism from 1980 to 2003, some 315 attacks in all, concluded that ‘there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world’s religions.’²⁰ Some of the key findings of the study which support this assessment include: only about half of the suicide attacks from this period can be associated by group or individual characteristics with Islamic fundamentalism; the leading practitioners of suicide terrorism are the secular, Marxist-Leninist Tamil Tigers, who committed 76 attacks; of the 384 individual attackers on which data could be found, only 166 or 43 percent were religious; there were 41 attacks attributed to Hezbollah during this period, of which 8 were carried out by Muslims, 27 by communists and 3 by Christians (the other 3 attackers could not be identified); and 95 percent of suicide attacks can be shown to be part of a broader political and military campaign which has a secular and strategic goal, namely, to end what is perceived as foreign occupation.²¹

Similarly, Marc Sageman’s widely quoted study, in which he compiled detailed biographical data on 172 participants of ‘Islamic terrorist’ groups, also throws doubt on any simple causal relationship between religion and terrorism. Some of the key findings of his study include: only 17 percent of the terrorists had an Islamic religious education; only 8 percent of terrorists showed any religious devotion as youths; only 13 percent of terrorists indicated that they were inspired to join solely on the basis of religious beliefs; increased religious devotion appeared to be an effect of joining the terrorist group, not the cause of it; ‘Islamic terrorist’ groups do not engage in active recruitment, as there are more volunteers than they can accommodate; the data, along with five decades of research, failed to provide any support for the notion of religious ‘brainwashing’; and there is no evidence of any individual joining a terrorist group solely on the basis of exposure to internet-based religious material.²² In short, these findings contradict both the substance and the tenor of much within the terrorism studies literature.

Finally, the notion that terrorism is a form of political violence practiced primarily by non-state actors is similarly belied by the evidence. The simple fact is that if terrorism refers to violence directed towards or threatened against civilians which is designed to instill terror or intimidate a population for political reasons – an entirely uncontroversial definition of terrorism and one which is commonly adopted within the literature – then state terrorism is arguably of much greater significance than dissident or non-state terrorism. States after all, have killed, tortured and intimidated hundreds of millions of people²³ over the past few decades, and a great many continue to do so today in places

²⁰ Pape, *Dying to Win*, 4.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 4, 17, 139, 205, 210. Pape’s findings are supported by recent ethnographic research. See Mia Bloom, 2005. *Dying to Kill*, New York: Columbia University Press.

²² Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 93, 97, 110, 115, 121-5, 163. Other studies which question the relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism include: Stephen Holmes, 2005. ‘Al Qaeda, September 11, 2001’, in Diego Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ariel Merari, 1990. ‘The Readiness to Kill and Die: Suicidal Terrorism in the Middle East’, in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism*, New York: Cambridge University Press; and Ehud Sprinzak, 2000. ‘Rational Fanatics’, *Foreign Policy*, 120: 66-73.

²³ A conservative estimate of state-instigated mass murder, forcible starvations and genocide against civilians suggests that states have been responsible for 170-200 millions deaths in the twentieth century alone – more than all other forms of deadly conflict, including war, combined. See R.J. Rummel, 1994. *Death by Government*, Somerset, NJ: Transaction Books. Over the past two decades, up to 300,000 people

like Colombia, Haiti, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Uzbekistan,²⁴ Kashmir, Palestine, Chechnya, Tibet, North Korea, Indonesia, Iraq, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Moreover, contrary to the dominant discourse, the involvement of Western democracies in terrorism has a long but generally ignored history, which includes: the extensive use of official terror by Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, the U.S. and other colonial powers in numerous countries throughout the colonial period;²⁵ the practices of strategic bombing during and since World War II;²⁶ U.S. support and sanctuary for a range of right-wing terrorist groups like the Contras, the Mujahideen and anti-Castro groups²⁷ during the Cold War, many of whom regularly committed terrorist acts;²⁸ U.S. tolerance of Irish Republican terrorist activity in the U.S.;²⁹ U.S. support for systematic state terror by numerous right-wing regimes across the world, perhaps most notoriously El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, Indonesia and Iran;³⁰ British support for Loyalist

have been 'disappeared' worldwide. See Jeffrey Sluka, 2000. 'Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology', in Jeffrey Sluka, ed., *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. By comparison, non-state terrorism is responsible for a few hundred deaths on average per year.

²⁴ The former British ambassador to Uzbekistan reveals the nature and extent of Uzbek state terror and western complicity in Craig Murray, 2006. *Murder in Samarkland: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing.

²⁵ Evidence of the use of terror by the colonial authorities is contained in an extremely large literature on the history and nature of colonialism, as well as the post-colonialism literature. For more immediately accessible summaries of colonial terror, see among others: Ian Beckett, 2001. *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*, London: Routledge; Jonathan Barker, 2002. *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism*, New Internationalist/Verso, 61-86; and Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*, 3-7.

²⁶ Beau Grosscup demonstrates how doctrines of strategic bombing are rooted in the logic that sowing terror among civilians is an effective and legitimate means of undermining the will of the enemy and forcing capitulation. See Beau Grosscup, 2006. *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment*, London: Zed Books.

²⁷ Michael Stohl quotes CIA data that shows that Cuban exile groups engaged in 89 separate terrorist incidents from 1969-79 alone. See Michael Stohl, 1988. 'States, Terrorism and State Terrorism: The Role of the Superpowers', in Robert Slater and Michael Stohl, eds., *Current Perspectives on International Terrorism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 189; Edward Herman, 1982. *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 63; and more broadly, Warren Hinckle and W. W. Turner, 1981. *The Fish is Red: The Story of the Secret War Against Castro*, New York: Harper and Row.

²⁸ See, among others: Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*; Frederick Gareau, 2004. *State Terrorism and the United States: From Counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism*, London: Zed Books; and Steven Livingston, 1994. *The Terrorism Spectacle*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. U.S. officials admitted as early as 1983 that the Contras were engaged in the killing of civilians, kidnapping, torture and indiscriminate attacks. It later emerged that a CIA Contra training manual, *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*, advocated exactly these kinds of civilian-directed proinsurgency tactics. Similar forms of training were provided through proxies to the Afghan insurgents. See Mahmood Mamdani, 2004. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, New York: Three Leaves Press, 102, 116.

²⁹ Official .S. toleration of IRA activity is described in Daniel Byman, 2005. *Confronting Passive Sponsors of Terrorism*, Analysis Paper No. 4, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution, 21-7.

³⁰ Ironically, and in a deliberate attempt to subvert the idea of U.S. support for state terror, many of these regimes received U.S. military assistance under the auspices of 'counter-terrorism' programmes. See among others: Ruth Blakeley, 2007. 'Bringing the State Back in to Terrorism Studies', International Studies Association (ISA) 47th Annual Convention, 28 Feb. – 3 March, 2007, Chicago, United States;

terrorism in Northern Ireland³¹ and various other 'Islamist' groups in Libya and Bosnia, among other;³² Spanish state terror during the dirty war against ETA;³³ French support for terror in Algeria and against Greenpeace in the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing; Italian sponsorship of right-wing terrorists; and Western support for accommodation with terrorists following the end of several high profile wars³⁴ – among many other examples. Western support for terrorism continues today in the form of U.S. military and political support for various warlords who employ terror against civilians in places like Afghanistan and Somalia, such as the Afghan warlord, General Dostum,³⁵ and continued U.S. sanctuary and support of anti-Castro terrorists,³⁶ former Latin American state terrorists³⁷ and other assorted Asian anticommunist groups.³⁸

In short, there is a great deal of research which contradicts the primary narratives and understandings of terrorism studies and demonstrates that much of the primary assumptions and knowledge of the field is overly simplistic, misconceived, incorrect or

George, *Western State Terrorism*; Herman, *The Real Terror Network*; Herman and O'Sullivan, *The 'Terrorism' Industry*; and Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States*.

³¹ See Jeffrey Sluka, "'For God and Ulster': The Culture of Terror and Loyalist Death Squads in Northern Ireland", in Sluka, ed., *Death Squad*.

³² For example, evidence from former British and French intelligence officers suggests that MI6 paid large sums of money to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a terrorist group associated with al Qaeda, to assassinate Colonel Gadafy in 1996. It is alleged that British intelligence provided sanctuary to members of the group in Britain and subsequently thwarted attempts by Libya to bring Osama bin Laden to justice. See 'MI6 "halted" Bin Laden Arrest', *Guardian Weekly*, November 14-20, 2002. There is also evidence that British and American intelligence agencies provided a green light to various 'Islamist' groups training insurgents to fight in Bosnia. See Michael Meacher, 'Britain now faces its own blowback. Intelligence interests may thwart the July bombings investigation', *The Guardian*, September 10, 2005.

³³ See Begona Aretxaga, 'A Fictional Reality: Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain', in Sluka, ed., *Death Squad*; Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

³⁴ Mamdani makes the pertinent point that in places like Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique and Congo governments were compelled to reconcile with terrorist movements who had engaged in mass civilian-directed terror. In this sense, reconciliation became a codeword for impunity and the lack of justice functioned to sustain an international atmosphere of tolerance towards terror. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 250-51. Such an approach would be akin to compelling the U.S. and its allies today to accept amnesty for the Taliban in Afghanistan and the various Iraqi insurgent groups in power-sharing settlements.

³⁵ For a discussion of terror by the Afghan warlord, General Dostum, see Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States*, 199-200. Gareau cites a number of reports by the UN and several human rights organisations documenting the use of extreme violence against prisoners and civilians. Disturbingly, Western military scholars appear to condone the use of state terror as they accept that the Afghan warlords employ 'violent operating methods', but argue that 'antagonizing them or calling them to account under Western legal structures is completely counterproductive to the reconstitution of Afghanistan. We must resist the inclination to be judgmental.' Sean Maloney, 2004. 'Afghanistan: From here to Eternity?', *Parameters*, Spring 2004, 13.

³⁶ U.S. sanctuary for anti-Castro terrorists goes back to before the Bay of Pigs and continues today. See Barker, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism*, 75; and Marcela Sanchez, 'Moral Misstep: Some Terrorists Get a Hero's Welcome', *Washington Post*, September 3, 2004, available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57838-2004Sept2.html>.

³⁷ For example, Emmanuel 'Toto' Constant, a notorious former death squad commander from Haiti with suspected links to the CIA, has been given sanctuary in the U.S. since the 1994 invasion. See David Grann, 2001. 'Giving "The Devil" His Due', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 287(6): 55-75.

³⁸ The U.S. continues to harbour groups such as Government of Free Vietnam (GFVN), the Cambodian Freedom Fighters (CFF) and other Vietnamese and Laotian dissident groups who have been involved in a number of terrorist attacks over the past few years. See Joshua Kurlantzick, 'Guerillas in Our Midst: Is the United States harboring terrorists?', *The American Prospect*, June 3, 2002, 14-16.

heavily biased.³⁹ The point is not to establish an alternative final truth about terrorism, but simply to draw attention to the inherent instabilities of the dominant narratives.⁴⁰ A key question which follows is how these assumptions and narratives have come to be accepted as established knowledge and commonsense when they are in fact so contested, and why they continue to hold such sway over the field.

TERRORISM STUDIES AND STATE POWER

There are a number of reasons which taken together can explain the persistence of this unstable terrorism 'knowledge'. At the most basic level, this knowledge is the direct consequence of poor research methodologies and faulty assumptions of the field, as identified in the review exercises mentioned above; more rigorous and thorough research would probably result in a much greater level of scepticism towards the existing canon of knowledge and an unwillingness to reproduce it uncritically.

Second, the dominance of this knowledge is directly related to the origins of the terrorism studies field in counter-insurgency studies,⁴¹ security studies and neo-realist approaches to international relations. These related fields are also heavily dominated by state-centric paradigms and orthodox national security assumptions; terrorism studies has simply carried the same ontological and epistemological orientation into the area of terrorism research. In a related development, the events of September 11, 2001 galvanised a whole new generation of scholars who were understandably eager to offer their skills in the cause of preventing further such attacks. Because these new scholars lacked a background in the existing literature and were eager to engage in research directly relevant to the government's counter-terrorism campaign, it is not surprising that existing orthodoxies – especially those propagated by state security officials and terrorism industry stalwarts – were adopted unquestionably. In this sense, there has been a seamless transition between the role of U.S. universities in assisting the fight against communism during the Cold War and the fight against terrorism in the war on terror.⁴²

Third and most importantly, the persistence of this 'knowledge' is related to the 'embedded' or 'organic' nature of many terrorism experts and scholars; that is, the extent to which terrorism scholars are directly linked to state institutions and sources of power

³⁹ Andrew Silke refers to 'a cabal of virulent myths and half-truths whose reach extends even to the most learned and experienced.' Silke, 'An Introduction to Terrorism Research', 20.

⁴⁰ Of course, beyond the question of intellectual reliability, language and narratives are also significant for the way in which they structure subject positions, construct accepted knowledge, commonsense and legitimate policy responses to the actors and events being described, exclude and de-legitimise alternative knowledge and practice, naturalise a particular political and social order, and construct and maintain a hegemonic regime of truth. These kinds of effects are explored in more detail in Jackson, 'Constructing Enemies'.

⁴¹ The emergence of terrorism studies as a branch of counter-insurgency studies is explained in more detail in Burnett and Whyte, 'Embedded Expertise', 11-13. In 1988, Schmid and Jongman concluded that much of the field's early output appeared to be 'counterinsurgency masquerading as political science.' Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, 182.

⁴² See Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, 2003. 'Too Polemical or Too Critical? Chomsky on the Study of the News Media and US Foreign Policy', *Review of International Studies*, 29: 553-68; Noam Chomsky, Laura Nader, Immanuel Wallerstein, Richard Lewontin, Richard Ohmann, Howard Zinn, Ira Katznelson, David Montgomery and Ray Seiver, 1997. *The Cold War and the University: Towards an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, New York: The New Press.

in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between the state and academic spheres.⁴³ Crucial in the evolution of ‘the terrorism industry’ has been the influence of the RAND Corporation, a non-profit research foundation founded by United States Air Force with deep ties to the American military and political establishments, as well as private security and military companies. RAND scholars have been deeply influential in both constructing the accepted knowledge of the field and in communicating it to policymakers and the public.⁴⁴ Moreover, RAND scholars have been influential in establishing other terrorism research centres, such as the St Andrews Centre for Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), and are involved in the running of the two main English language journals of the field. RAND-connected scholars sit on the editorial boards of both *Terrorism and Political Violence* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. In fact, RAND scholars author a significant proportion of the articles published in these journals.⁴⁵

More broadly, it can be argued that universities themselves are ‘embedded’ institutions in the sense that they are deeply integrated into the corporate-government nexus and function as one of the primary supporting institutions of the liberal capitalist order. This function can be seen partly in: the extent to which business people sit on the board of trustees of many universities; university research is heavily dependent on state, corporate and foundation funding; there is a revolving door of personnel between the universities, the corporate sector and the state;⁴⁶ and one of the primary functions of the university is to produce graduates useful to the state and business.⁴⁷ Although there are few systematic studies, there is evidence that very large sums of investment from state, foundation and corporate sources are going to university projects designed to assist state counter-terrorism.⁴⁸

Together with certain state, military, think tank and public intellectuals, there is little doubt that the leading terrorism studies scholars now constitute an influential and exclusive ‘epistemic community’ – a network of ‘specialists with a common world view

⁴³ A detailed, if somewhat polemical analysis of the public-private links that make up the ‘terrorism industry’ as it was before September 11, 2001 can be found in Herman and O’Sullivan, *The ‘Terrorism’ Industry* and George, *Western State Terrorism*. A more recent analysis can be found in Burnett and Whyte, ‘Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism’. A more mainstream terrorism studies assessment concludes that terrorism ‘experts’ who do not maintain a strong pro-Western bias soon become marginalized in the field and are denied access to policymakers and major conferences. See Ilardi, ‘Redefining the Issues’, 222.

⁴⁴ Senior officials in several U.S. administrations have held positions in RAND, and as with other foundations and think tanks, there is a revolving door of personnel between RAND and the state. For example, Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld are both former RAND administrators. See Burnett and Whyte, ‘Embedded Expertise’, 8.

⁴⁵ See Silke, ‘The Road Less Travelled’, 194.

⁴⁶ For example, McGeorge Bundy, Walter Rostow, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Anthony Lake and Condoleezza Rice were all university professors before they were appointed as national security advisors, as were several U.S. representatives to the UN, namely, Donald McHenry, Jeane Kirkpatrick and Madeline Albright. See David Newsome, 1995-6. ‘Foreign Policy and Academia’, *Foreign Policy*, 101: 53.

⁴⁷ See Herring and Robinson, ‘Too Polemical or Too Critical?’; Chomsky et al, *The Cold War and the University*; and Michael McKinley, 2004. ‘The Co-option of the University and the Privileging of Annihilation’, *International Relations*, 18(2): 151-72. McKinley notes that the CIA has a significant presence on university campuses from where it recruits (p.163).

⁴⁸ Andrew Silke argues that the U.S. government was spending enormous sums on terrorism research even before 2001 – \$727 million in 2000 and at least another \$2.4 billion since then. Andrew Silke, 2004. ‘An Introduction to Terrorism Research’, in Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism*, 26.

about cause and effect relationships which relate to their domain of expertise, and common political values about the type of policies to which they should be applied'.⁴⁹ Based on an examination of 32 prominent terrorism studies scholars, Edna Reid describes the research process among these intellectuals as a closed, circular and static system of information and investigation which tends to accept dominant myths about terrorism without strong empirical investigation for long periods before empirical research disproves them.⁵⁰ From a Gramscian perspective, the core terrorism studies scholars can be understood as 'organic intellectuals' intimately connected – institutionally, financially, politically and ideologically – with a state hegemonic project. From this perspective, the state-centric orientation of the field and its continuing reproduction of the guiding myths is a natural and thoroughly unsurprising consequence of its position within the existing power structure.

Finally, employing a critical theorising framework would suggest that this 'knowledge' persists and is continually reproduced as a dominant discourse because it is functional to the exercise of state and elite power. On the one hand, it provides a coherent and familiar discursive frame for internal policy debate; on the other, it draws on a series of powerful cultural frames and existing discursive structures, making it ideal for the generation of public legitimacy and the construction of political boundaries.⁵¹ That is, it can easily be employed as a 'political technology' in the promotion of particular political projects and the long-term maintenance of elite power. From this perspective, the central assumptions and narratives of terrorism studies are deeply ideological in that they frequently work to: de-legitimise dissent and resistance to state power and elite projects; render invisible the terror at the heart of much state violence, including forms of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency; justify domestic political projects, such as the construction of intrusive surveillance systems; bolster the power and priorities of the agencies of state security and the executive branch by normalising a state of exception; benefit powerful economic actors linked to the security sector, such as private security firms, defence industries and pharmaceutical companies; control wider social and political dissent and set the parameters for acceptable public debate; provide intellectual and moral justification for foreign projects like military expansion or regime change; and prevent the emergence of alternative, non-violent responses to terrorism – among others.

In short, the knowledge practices of terrorism studies function as a kind of disciplinary and hegemonic truth regime designed to reify existing structures of power. At the very least, the dominant knowledge of the field is an ideal type of 'problem-solving theory'.⁵² As Robert Cox argues, problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action', and then works to 'make these

⁴⁹ Diane Stone, 1996. *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, London: Frank Cass, 86.

⁵⁰ Edna Reid, 1993. 'Terrorism Research and the Diffusion of Ideas', *Knowledge and Policy*, 6: 28.

⁵¹ A number of studies have noted the extent to which the discourse of terrorism can be used as a practice of statecraft to construct and maintain notions of identity and boundaries between self and other, inside and outside and citizen and alien. See Carol Winkler, 2006. *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press; Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*; and Annamarie Oliverio, 1997. 'The State of Injustice: The Politics of Terrorism and the Production of Order', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 38(1-2): 48-63.

⁵² For a more in-depth discussion on this point, see Gunning, 'Babies and Bathwaters'.

relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble'.⁵³ It does not question the extent to which the status quo – the hierarchies and operation of power and the inequalities and injustices thus generated – is implicated in the 'problem' of terrorism and other forms of subaltern violence. Moreover, through the use of social scientific language and modes of inquiry, political assumptions about terrorism are masqueraded as technical issues and sides are taken on terrorism's major ethical and political questions.

In the end, these characteristics of the terrorism studies field, in particular its state centricity and problem-solving orientation, have important analytical and normative implications. Analytically, it narrows the potential range of research subjects, encourages conformity in outlook and method, and obstructs vigorous, wide-ranging debate, particularly regarding the causes of non-state terrorism and the use of terrorism by liberal democratic states and their allies. Constrained from moving beyond the narrow state-centric paradigm within which it functions, the possibilities for theoretical and empirical innovation and advancement are curtailed.

Perhaps more importantly, from a normative perspective it means that terrorism studies is a largely co-opted field of research that is deeply enmeshed with the actual practices of counter-terrorism and the exercise of state power.⁵⁴ Disturbingly, it means that terrorism studies is complicit in a range of state projects, many of which are not only counter-productive but oppressive in and of themselves, such as increased surveillance, profiling, shoot-to-kill policies and creeping restrictions on civil liberties. It also identifies the field with a number of recent state policies of dubious moral legitimacy, such as regime change, rendition, torture and extrajudicial assassination. Terrorism studies provides both the intellectual justification for such counter-terrorist policies, and the broader academic legitimacy which the state can call upon to convince the public of the rightness of its policies. As a consequence, terrorism studies must bear some moral responsibility for the conspicuous abuses of previous counter-terrorism campaigns and the current war on terror.

CRITICAL TERRORISM STUDIES

In the broadest sense, critical terrorism studies (CTS) refers to self-consciously critical terrorism-related research which adopts a sceptical attitude towards state-centric understandings of terrorism and which does not take existing terrorism knowledge for granted but is willing to challenge widely held assumptions and narratives. In this sense, rather than a precise theoretical label, CTS is more of an orientation or critical perspective that seeks to maintain a certain distance from prevailing ideologies and orthodoxies. Beyond this broad orientation however, we would argue that CTS is founded upon on a specific set of epistemological, ontological and ethical-normative commitments.

⁵³ Robert Cox, 1981. 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2): 128-9.

⁵⁴ As Steve Smith argues, the broader discipline of international relations within which terrorism studies operates, works to reinforce dominant Western practices of statecraft and is deeply implicated in constructing the possibilities for existence of the international system. Steve Smith, 2004. 'Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11', *International Studies Quarterly*, 48: 499.

Epistemological Commitments

CTS rests upon a number of specific epistemological commitments, including an understanding of knowledge as a social process constructed through language, discourse and inter-subjective practices. From this perspective, it is understood that terrorism knowledge always reflects the social-cultural context within which it emerges, which means among other things that it is highly gendered and Eurocentric. CTS understands that knowledge is always intimately connected to power, that knowledge is ‘always for someone and for some purpose’ and that ‘regimes of truth’ function to entrench certain hierarchies of power and exclude alternative, counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge and practice. CTS therefore, starts with an acceptance of the basic insecurity of all knowledge and the impossibility of neutral or objective knowledge about terrorism.⁵⁵ It also evinces an acute sensitivity to the ways in which terrorism knowledge can be deployed as a political technology in the furtherance of hegemonic projects and directs attention to the interests that underlie knowledge claims. Thus, CTS starts by asking: who is terrorism knowledge for, and what functions does it serve in supporting their interests?

There are at least three practical consequences of this broad epistemological orientation. First, similar to the field of Critical Security Studies (CSS), CTS begins from an analysis of the epistemological and ontological claims that make the discipline possible in the first place,⁵⁶ in particular, the false naturalism of traditional theory and the political content of all terrorism knowledge. More specifically, its research focuses on uncovering and understanding the aims of knowledge-production within terrorism studies, the operation of the terrorism studies epistemic community and more broadly, the social and political construction of terrorism knowledge. Such analysis can be achieved using deconstructive, narrative, genealogical, ethnographic and historical analyses, as well as neo-Gramscian and Constructivist approaches. The purpose of such research is not simply descriptive nor is it to establish the ‘correct’ or ‘real truth’ of terrorism; rather, it aims to destabilise dominant interpretations and demonstrate the inherently contested and political nature of the discourse. It aims to reveal the politics behind seemingly neutral knowledge.

A second practical consequence for CTS research is a continuous and transparent critical-normative reflexivity in the knowledge-production process.⁵⁷ That is, CTS research acknowledges the impossibility of neutral or objective terrorism knowledge and evinces an acute awareness of the political use to which it can be put, as well as its inbuilt biases and assumptions. It thus attempts to avoid the uncritical use of labels, assumptions and narratives regarding terrorism in ways that would naturalize them or imply that they were uncontested. Crucial in this respect is an appreciation of the inherently gendered and Eurocentric character of dominant knowledge and discourse on terrorism.

⁵⁵ As Steve Smith puts it ‘there can be no such thing as a value-free, non-normative social science’. Smith, ‘Singing Our World into Existence’, 499.

⁵⁶ See Michael Williams and Keith Krause, 1997. ‘Preface: Toward Critical Security Studies’, in Michael Williams and Keith Krause, eds., *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, vii-xxi.

⁵⁷ See Karena Shaw, 2003. ‘Whose Knowledge for What Politics?’, *Review of International Studies*, 29: 199-221.

A third consequence for CTS research is methodological and disciplinary pluralism, in particular, a willingness to adopt post-positivist and non-international relations-based methods and approaches. In this sense, CTS refuses to privilege materialist, rationalist and positivist approaches to social science over interpretive and reflectivist approaches.⁵⁸ Avoiding an exclusionary commitment to the narrow logic of traditional social scientific explanation based on linear notions of cause and effect, CTS accepts that Constructivist and post-structuralist approaches which subscribe to an interpretive ‘logic of understanding’ can open space for questions and perspectives that are foreclosed by positivism and rationalism. This stance is more than methodological; it is also political in the sense that it does not treat one model of social science as if it were the sole bearer of legitimacy.⁵⁹

Ontological Commitments

Ontologically, CTS is characterised by a general scepticism towards, and often a reticence to employ, the ‘terrorism’ label because it is recognised that in practice it has always been a pejorative rather than analytical term and that to use the term is a powerful form of labelling that implies a political judgement about the legitimacy of actors and their actions. Terrorism is fundamentally a social fact rather than a brute fact; while extreme physical violence is experience as a brute fact, its wider cultural-political meaning is decided by social agreement and inter-subjective practices. In this sense, just as ‘races’ do not exist but classifications of humankind does, so too ‘terrorism’ does not exist but classifications of different forms of political violence does.⁶⁰ That is, ‘The nature of terrorism is not inherent in the violent act itself. One and the same act... can be terrorist or not, depending on intention and circumstance’⁶¹ – not to mention cultural and political context. For this reason, CTS refuses to define terrorism either in ways that delegitimise only some actors while simultaneously according the mantle of legitimate violence to others,⁶² or in ways that legitimise violence simply because they are conducted in particular circumstances, such as during war. Instead, CTS views terrorism fundamentally as a strategy or tactic of political violence that can be, and frequently is, employed by both state and non-state actors and during times of war or peace.⁶³

⁵⁸ See Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 1998. ‘Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(3): 261.

⁵⁹ Smith, ‘Singing Our World into Existence’, 514.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Sluka, 2002. ‘Comment: What Anthropologists should know about the Concept of “Terrorism”’, *Anthropology Today*, 18(2): 23.

⁶¹ Schmid and Jongman, *Political Terrorism*, 101.

⁶² One of the most influential definitions in the world today, and one adopted uncritically by a great many terrorism studies scholars, comes from the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. It states: ‘The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.’ This formulation clearly implies that terrorism is something ‘subnational groups’ largely do and legitimate state actors do not. It is therefore, according to this definition, a characteristic of certain groups rather than simply a strategy or tactic that any actor can adopt. U.S. Department of State, ‘Patterns of Global Terrorism’, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 30 April, 2001, available online at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/2419.htm>.

⁶³ As Charles Tilly puts it, ‘Properly understood, terror is a strategy, not a creed. Terrorists range across a wide spectrum of organizations, circumstances, and beliefs. Terrorism is not a single causally coherent

Moreover, as a strategy, terrorism involves the deliberate targeting of civilians in order to intimidate or terrorise for distinctly *political* purposes. As Alex Schmid puts it, like war, terrorism is also a continuation of politics by other means.⁶⁴ CTS rejects all attempts to promiscuously extend the definition of terrorism to other forms of subaltern violence, such as criminal or religious violence, or to de-politicise the origins of the violence.

The important point is that terrorism is not an ideology or form of politics in itself;⁶⁵ it is rather, a tool employed at specific times, for specific periods of time, by specific actors and for specific political goals. In this sense, it is not a freestanding phenomenon: there is no *terrorism*, just the instrumental use of terror by actors.⁶⁶ This has important implications for notions of identity, and subsequently for the strategies and ethics of counter-terrorism, not least because it implies that the 'terrorist' label is never a fixed or essential identity and that 'terrorists' may choose to abandon its use as a tactic for achieving political aims. A pertinent illustration of the ontological instability of the terrorist label and the potentialities for political metamorphosis is the observation that there are no less than four recognised 'terrorists' who have gone on to win the Nobel Peace Prize: Menachim Begin, Sean McBride, Nelson Mandela and Yassir Arafat.⁶⁷ In other words: 'Once a terrorist, is not always a terrorist.'⁶⁸ Similarly, the inability of the UK and U.S. governments to agree on a common list of proscribed terrorist organisations, despite holding similar definitions of terrorism, speaks to the inherent subjectivity of applying this label in the real world.⁶⁹

There are a number of direct consequences of adopting this particular ontological stance. For example, there is a determination by CTS scholars to redress the current imbalance within orthodox terrorism studies and 'bring the state back in' to terrorism research, exploring the logic and circumstances in which states employ civilian-directed violence to terrorise and intimidate society for political purposes.⁷⁰ CTS is also interested in uncovering the political and strategic 'causes' or reasons why actors choose to employ terrorist tactics, and the processes by which they abandon the use of terrorism as a political strategy in particular historical and political contexts. In this sense, CTS is determined to avoid universalising practices that are very specific and naturalising what

phenomenon. No social scientist can speak responsibly as though it were.' Charles Tilly, 2004. 'Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists', *Sociological Theory*, 22(1): 5-13.

⁶⁴ Alex Schmid, 2004. 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(2): 202.

⁶⁵ Groups specializing in terror and no other forms of political action do sometimes form, but they are extremely rare and typically they remain highly unstable and ephemeral. In reality, most terrorism occurs in the context of wider political struggles in which the use of terror is one strategy among other more routine forms of contentious action. Tilly, 'Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists', 6. See also, Schmid, 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', 199.

⁶⁶ Brendan O'Duffy made this point in comments at the British International Studies Association Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) and the Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Contemporary Political Violence (CSR) conference 'Is it Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?', University of Manchester, 27-28 October 2006.

⁶⁷ See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, x.

⁶⁸ Schmid, 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', 205.

⁶⁹ Andrew Silke notes that although there were 13 organizations that appeared on both countries' lists, the U.S. list included 15 groups that did not appear on the UK list, and the UK in turn proscribed eight organizations which had not been censured by the U.S. Silke, 'An Introduction to Terrorism Research', 5-6.

⁷⁰ See Blakeley, 'Bringing the State Back in to Terrorism Studies'.

is actually highly contingent.⁷¹ Instead, CTS remains acutely sensitive to the need for historical, political and cultural context in understanding the use of terrorism as a strategy. In addition, given the central role that labelling plays within the terrorism studies field, CTS is committed to questioning the nature and politics of representation – why, when, how and for what purpose do groups and individuals come to be named as ‘terrorist’ and what consequences does this have?

Ethical Commitments

In addition to the reasons alluded to above, CTS is openly normative in orientation for the simple reason that through the identification of who the ‘terrorist other’ actually is – and it should be remembered that deciding and affirming which individuals and groups may be rightly called ‘terrorists’ is a routine practice in the field – terrorism studies actually provides an authoritative judgement about who may legitimately be killed, tortured, rendered or incarcerated by the state in the name of counter-terrorism.⁷² In this sense, there is no escaping the ethico-political content of the subject. Rather than projecting or attempting to maintain a false neutrality or objectivity, CTS openly adheres to the values and priorities of universal human and societal security, rather than traditional, narrowly defined conceptions of national security in which the state takes precedence over any other actor. Moreover, in the tradition of Critical Theory, the core commitment of CTS is to a broad conception of emancipation, which is understood as the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential and improvements in individual and social actualisation and well-being.

In practice, this ethical standpoint necessarily entails transparency in specifying one’s political-normative stance and values, a continuous critical reflexivity regarding the aims, means and outcomes of terrorism research, particularly as it intersects with state counter-terrorism, and an enduring concern with questions of politics and ethics. In turn, this has clear implications for research funding, knowledge production and the ethics of research in ‘suspect communities’.⁷³ It also entails an enduringly critical stance towards projects of state counter-terrorism, particularly as they affect human and societal security. CTS recognises that such a stance involves a delicate and creative balance between avoiding complicity in oppressive state practices through a continual process of critique, whilst simultaneously maintaining access to power in order to affect change.⁷⁴ From this perspective, CTS is determined to go beyond critique and deconstruction and actively work to bring about positive social change – in part through an active engagement with the political process and the power holders in society.

⁷¹ See David Campbell, 2005. ‘Beyond Choice: The Onto-politics of Critique’, *International Relations*, 19(1): 128.

⁷² In an explicit example of this kind of ethical practice, Rohan Gunaratna, an acclaimed terrorism ‘expert’, openly suggests the assassination of high profile Al Qaeda figures and leaders as a counter-terrorism strategy. Rohan Gunaratna, 2003. *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, 2nd ed., London: Hurst & Co, 233-5. Another key figure in the field, Paul Wilkinson, engages in a more opaque version of the same practice by describing Israel’s extra-judicial assassinations as ‘ruthless acts of counter-terror’. Paul Wilkinson, 2002. *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, London: Frank Cass, 68.

⁷³ The research ethics of CTS are explored in more detail in Smyth, ‘Wither the Study of Political Terror?’

⁷⁴ Ibid.

In short, based on an acceptance of a fundamental prior responsibility to ‘the other’, CTS sees itself as being engaged in a critical praxis aimed at ending the use of terror by any and all actors and in promoting the exploration of non-violent forms of conflict transformation. Specifically, this entails a willingness to try and understand and empathise with the mind-sets, world views and subjectivities of non-Western ‘others’ and a simultaneous refusal to assume or impute their intentions and values.⁷⁵ We recognise that in relation to the ‘terrorist other’, this is a taboo stance within Western scholarship. Moreover, it is a taboo that has been institutionalised in a legal framework in which withholding information from the authorities is a crime, in which academics are being asked to report on their students⁷⁶ and in which attempting to understand the subjectivities of ‘terrorist’ suspects could be interpreted as ‘glorification of terrorism’ – a crime under UK law.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, we view it as both analytically and ethically responsible and remain committed to defending the intellectual and ethical integrity of such work.

In this sense, CTS imbues many of the values, concerns and orientations of peace research, conflict resolution and CCS. Contrary to the views of some critics, CTS is not an anti-state or anti-Western project; neither is it a discourse of complacency or an appeasement of tyranny.⁷⁸ Rather, it is a vigorous anti-terror project based on fundamental human rights and values and a concern for social justice, equality and an end to structural and physical violence and discrimination. It views civilian-directed forms of violence as inherently illegitimate, regardless of what type of actor commits them, in what context or to what purpose. It also presupposes that human agency and human ingenuity are potentially unlimited, particularly in the pursuit of non-violent solutions to injustice and violence, and that there are more humane and effective ways of responding to terrorism than reflexively engaging in retaliatory and disproportionate counter-violence.

In sum, CTS is both a theoretical commitment and a political orientation.⁷⁹ Theoretically, it engages in permanent critical exploration of the ontology, epistemology and praxis of terrorism studies and counter-terrorism practice, and seeks ultimately to introduce alternative interpretations and understandings into an established field of discourse. Politically, it is committed to an ethical reflexivity in relation to its own knowledge practices, an ‘ethos of political criticism’⁸⁰ in relation to the broader field and an emancipatory politics in regards to praxeological questions raised by counter-terrorism policy.

⁷⁵ See Tarak Barkawi, 2004. ‘On the Pedagogy of “Small Wars”’, *International Affairs*, 80(1): 19-38.

⁷⁶ In late 2006, the Department of Education in the UK drew up proposals asking academics to report directly to Special Branch on ‘Asian-looking’ and Muslim students who they suspect of involvement in extremism and supporting terrorist violence. See Vikram Dodd, ‘Universities Urged to Spy on Muslims’, *The Guardian*, 16 October, 2006, available online at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329601709-108229,00.html>, and ‘Disingenuous, Patronising and Dangerous’, *The Guardian*, 19 February, 2007, available online at: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329720570-108228,00.html>.

⁷⁷ Smyth, ‘Wither the Study of Political Study?’

⁷⁸ This charge is erroneously made in Jones and Smith, ‘Pedagogy or Pedantry’ and ‘The Commentariat and Discourse Failure’.

⁷⁹ CTS shares many of the same core concerns and orientations of Critical Security Studies. See for example, Ken Booth, 2005. ‘Beyond Critical Security Studies’, in Ken Booth, ed., *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 268.

⁸⁰ Campbell, ‘Beyond Choice’, 133.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to outline some of the central problems facing the field of terrorism studies, most importantly, its state-centricity and problem-solving orientation. I have argued that these inherent weaknesses are a consequence of its intellectual origins in security studies and counter-insurgency. More importantly, I have suggested that these weaknesses pose serious analytical and normative obstacles in the way of progress and development within the field, and are the main reason why an explicitly 'critical terrorism studies' is urgently called for. I have tentatively outlined what CTS entails in terms of some of its core ontological, epistemological and normative commitments, its main subject matter and some of the central issues and questions it should be addressing. The purpose of this explanation was not to prescriptively establish a new orthodoxy or rigid set of disciplinary boundaries. Rather, its aim was to articulate the contours of a rather broad church in which scholars are nonetheless united by a core set of concerns and commitments and to stimulate further questions and debate about the current state of the field. Similarly, it was not meant to create division or provoke further conflict between orthodox and critical approaches. In fact, one of the main goals of CTS is to draw in a great deal of the critical, innovative and rigorous research that is produced outside of the established terrorism studies circuit as a means of stimulating debate and reinvigorating the broader field.⁸¹

On a positive note, it is important to note that in terms of a critical mass of scholars and an increasing set of activities and publications, the foundations for CTS are in fact, already well established. In the first place, there is a small but significant group of scholars from within the traditional terrorism studies field who have consistently displayed a 'critical' approach to the dominant knowledge and practices of the terrorism industry, even if they would not identify themselves as 'critical' scholars.⁸² Importantly, these respected 'traditional' terrorism scholars have begun to stimulate debate within the field about some of the core problems identified in this paper. Second, there is a tradition of mainly left-wing, critically-oriented scholarship which has consistently spoken out against the embedded and politically-compromised nature of the terrorism studies field and which has attempted to draw attention to the problem of state terrorism and in particular, the record of Western support for state terror and imperialism.⁸³ Third, there is a growing cohort of scholars and graduate students both from within international relations and from other disciplines who have since September 11, 2001 attempted to provide a critical analysis of the war on terrorism and who have adopted alternative

⁸¹ See Gunning, 'Babies and Bathwaters'.

⁸² Although these categories are tentative, some of the scholars who arguably fall into this category include: Martha Crenshaw, Ronald Crelinsten, Leonard Weinberg, Jeffrey Ross, Ted Robert Gurr, Andrew Silke, John Horgan, Ami Pedahzur, Alex Schmid, Albert Jongman, Robert Pape, Mia Bloom, Ehud Sprinzak, and Adrian Guelke, among others.

⁸³ Scholars who fall into this category include: Edward Herman, Gerry O'Sullivan, Alexander George, Michael Stohl, Noam Chomsky, Robert Slater, Frederick Gareau, Michael McClintock, Joseba Zulaika, William Douglass, Jeffrey Sluka, Steven Livingston, Beau Grosscup, Carl Boggs, Doug Stokes, Eric Herring and Alex Callinicos among others.

paradigms, approaches and methods to study issues related to terrorism.⁸⁴ For the most part, these scholars have tended to publish their findings outside of the field's core journals and forums.

Apart from a significant group of scholars (and their publications) who would fall within the broad boundaries of a CTS even if they would not necessarily self-identify with it, there are a range of other developments which suggest that CTS is close to achieving coherence as a subfield. First, there have been a series of stand-alone conferences,⁸⁵ seminars and panels within major conferences⁸⁶ which have taken an explicitly 'critical' perspective. Second, supporting the growing number of 'critical' terrorism publications, there are now a number of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes which self-consciously identify as 'critical terrorism studies' in order to distinguish themselves from orthodox terrorism studies.⁸⁷ Third, the establishment of the international, peer-reviewed, cross-disciplinary journal, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, provides an important outlet for critically-oriented research and a focus for theoretical debate on the evolution of the field. Much of this research is currently being published far outside of traditional terrorism studies circles; the journal is one means of drawing it together in a centrally accessible form.⁸⁸ Finally and perhaps most importantly, on the basis of a careful monitoring of public and academic discourse, private conversations with policymakers and policy intellectuals and the recent election results in the U.S., it can be argued that a more questioning discourse on the war on terrorism is slowly beginning to consolidate.⁸⁹ The present juncture therefore, presents a more politically opportune moment for such a project than at any time since the start of the war on terror. In any case, taken together, these factors presage an exciting and much-needed development in the area of terrorism studies.

⁸⁴ A few of the scholars who arguably fall within this broad characterisation include: Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, Jeroen Gunning, Ruth Blakeley, John Collins, Ross Glover, Anthony Burke, Stuart Croft, Jonny Burnett, Dave Whyte, Paul Rogers, Stephen Holmes, Thomas Copeland, Mark Sedgewick, John Mueller and Sandra Silberstein among many others.

⁸⁵ For example, the British International Studies Association Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG) and the Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Contemporary Political Violence (CSR) held a conference entitled 'Is it Time for a Critical Terrorism Studies?' at the University of Manchester, 27-28 October, 2006.

⁸⁶ The panel of which this paper forms a part, Panel WC10 'The Case for a Critical Terrorism Studies', International Studies Association (ISA) 47th Annual Convention, 28 Feb. – 3 March, 2007, Chicago, United States, is an example. Similarly, three panels at the 2006 annual British International Studies Association (BISA) conference were sponsored by the Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CSTWG).

⁸⁷ The Politics Department at the University of Manchester and the Department of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth both teach courses in Critical Terrorism Studies.

⁸⁸ It has been found that between 1988-2001, nearly 80 percent of articles on terrorism were published outside of the core terrorism studies journals. See Gordon, 'Terrorism and Knowledge Growth', 109.

⁸⁹ See Smyth, 'Wither the Study of Political Terror?' and Gunning, 'Babies and Bathwaters'.